





The Baby Trap

By Ellen Peck

Is having children the be-all and end-all of a woman's life? Or is it a cunningly-woven web to snare females in a boring routine of drudgery?

For many women, the birth of children marks the end of adventure, of growth and sexuality, sometimes even of love itself. A woman caught in this situation has less time to spend with the man she married and is less free to share his world. And the man, harassed by mounting bills, the lack of spontaneity in his life and the awesome two-decade

obligations of fatherhood, might look elsewhere for the joy and excitement his marriage has lost.

As one young husband told a marriage guidance counselor: "I married a lovely, sexy girl — then she turned into someone's mother."

In examining the effects of children on the emotional balance of marriage,



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27-year-old Ellen Peck, who is married herself but has decided never to have children, spoke to women of many ages, with children and without. In her book *The Baby Trap* she claims the girls she talked to who didn't have children were, practically without exception, prettier, better speakers, much more aware, more alive, more exciting, more satisfied. She said they had — almost without exception, too — better marriages and happier husbands than those wives who did have children.

She reveals how the media, filled with appealing babies and carefree mothers and idealised families, form part of the trap which is baited by the manufacturers for whom babies mean healthy profits and an ever constant market. She places part of the blame on all well-meaning relatives, on identity-confused girls who are seeking a role or "something to offer" their husbands, and on the machinations of a culture that finds babies profitable and childless women a threat.

From birth, she says, boys are encouraged to grow and taught to conquer new worlds while girls, from pram to altar, are conditioned to believe that their only real growth and fulfilment will come with the bearing of children.

Ellen Peck found the two usual reasons for a voluntary childless lifestyle are an awareness of ecology and the problem of the population explosion, or the desire for wider personal experiences.

We reprint here some of the controversial results of her research. Clegg does not necessarily agree with her views, as certainly many mothers are happy and content with their children, but we felt we should present her arguments.

If the desire to reproduce resulted from an active, operating instinct, no girl would be free from it. But many are — and the number who are no longer constitutes an insignificant minority. The desire to bear children results instead from learning. Within our culture, from the earliest baby-girlhood, you learn that you should want children. And you learn from many teachers.

Aunt Helen teaches you. She gives you a baby doll, saying, "You'll take such good care of her. And some day you'll grow up and have your own baby. You'll be such a good mother." (Does Aunt Helen ever see you with Johnny, the boy next door? "Oh, you get along so well with boys! Some day you'll be such a good wife." Is she apt

to say, "Some day you'll be a great artist," as you finger paint?) No; the emphasis is always on the mother role for little girls.

Meanwhile, is little Johnny being similarly told and taught "Some day you'll be such a good father?" No. Thus, far more women than men desire babies. This supports strongly the idea that the desire for offspring is learned; babies play a larger part in a woman's learned role.

That cuddly doll is the first bait in the baby trap. Later on, as you begin to read and as you develop into a consumer, there are other lures. There are the ads, one glorious baby food mother, many gleaming children; mother in mink cowering through snow with children; mother skilfully applying an elastic bandage to her



six-year-old's knee; mother and daughter doing laundry together with Whiteo or washing up with Glug.

The baby trap is also the picture feature on Mr and Mrs Successful with their three or four children, it's the trap of the glossy situation TV series, where the doll-like mother manages home and family with freedom and expertise. It's the trap of most magazines, with their incessant articles on the motherhood theme.

A Former MP's Wife: My Miracle Pregnancy at 41.

How Children Can Help Your Marriage.

Special Beauty Section — the Young Mother.

Miracle Babies — Beautiful Parents.

I went to tell you about this trap, not because I see babies as the enemies of the human race, as does author Isaac Asimov, but because I see babies as the enemies of you.

The people who set the trap never tell you what's apt to happen to you

after that baby is born. They never tell you that many men find themselves less attracted to their wives after the physical changes of pregnancy and childbirth. They never tell you that there may be a correlation between fatherhood and infidelity. They never tell you that, rather than keeping a marriage together, children can very often quickly drive it apart. (In magazines, I found a dozen or more case histories of marriages saved by the birth of a baby. In divorce lawyers' offices in a total of four cities, I found more than 50 case histories of husbands who had filed for divorce during their wives' pregnancies or immediately afterwards). The people who set the trap never tell you that if you are not very careful you'll be cheated out of 15 years of young life and intense experiences.

I don't want you to wake up a dozen years from now and realise that your days are built on routine, that your life consists of living vicariously through your children, that you've lost your zest for new experiences — and quite possibly your husband's interest, too.

And yet, these are just a few consequences of the baby trap. I know, because I've seen them happen to friends of mine. And it doesn't always take 15 years to happen. It can happen in five years. Or one.

Yes, the media hold up those models of serene and gleaming pregnancy. And you, seeing them, imagine yourself as a pretty, happy mother-to-be, basking in attention and daydreaming of glories to come. It doesn't always work that way.

I didn't with a friend of mine named Frances. She seemed more withdrawn and distant every time I dropped by her flat between lectures at university. "I feel miserable so much of the time," she said one morning, as we were having coffee on a kitchen table cluttered with shower gels (frays, ferry cloth romper suits, blankets, bottle warmers, a little set of textures for the baby to touch, colorful mobiles, toddler towels with ducks on them), and there didn't seem to be any reason for this malaise that her doctor could find.

As I said, "Well, Fran, it will all be over in another month; you'll forget about these aches and pains once you have the baby." It occurred to me that I wasn't really sure if what I was saying was true at all. You can forget aches and pains, once they're over, if they were only aches and pains.

But I thought something else was involved. Fran seemed depressed, not ill. She just seemed a different person

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From the girl who had sat with Bob in the coffee bar every morning, going over his acting assignment with him, teasing him about having to repeat a scene with his leading lady. (Some time later, an obstetrician I interviewed explained, "When pregnant women come to me with severe physical distress, I often do something close to marriage counselling").

I wasn't quite wise enough to figure out, at that time, that Fran and Bob were having trouble; they had been so in love the year before that that possibility just didn't occur to me. But I did know that something seemed wrong. And I did know I didn't envy Fran, at all. Nor do I envy what has happened to her marriage since the birth of their child.

I married several years later. And watched not just Fran but all the girls I had known in school, one by one, start their families. I went to christenings. And I held a lot of hands as girlfriends started to have husband trouble.

It occurred to me that I wasn't having the problems they complained of. And I wondered why I didn't think it was because Bill and I were any more in love when we got married than, say, Fran and Bob were.

And I don't think I'm any more clever than my girl friends. I think it's because I have not burdened the relationship Bill and I have with third parties who would distract our attention from each other.

That idea got some reinforcement from another girl I know. Lori is a friend of mine who lives in Chicago. For a while, we were single girls together working in the offices of the same insurance company on LaSalle Street. Lori is rather a wild girl. She goes to more parties in a month than I did the entire time I was in Chicago. She's not exactly gorgeous — well, yes, she is, come to think of it. She's bright, blond and magnetic to the point where the girl who had the desk next to Lori never would let her husband come to our offices.

Lori is 30 and looks 18. She's fickle, irresponsible and inclined to fly off in some where for weekends — and not, usually, alone. She dates married men, because most of the men she knows are married. The last time I saw her I asked if most of the married men who took her out had children. Her answer was immediate.

"Are you kidding? All of them. In fact, when they put out the kids' pictures at a cocktail party, I know they want to get serious for the evening. Lots of times it's an unmistakable signal. Almost code for,

"Look, I'm married, honey, I won't fool you, but it's just because of these kids; my wife means nothing to me."

"Sure, it's the guys with kids," she continued; "the ones who don't have kids still like their wives."

The ones who don't have kids still like their wives. Then why is it, if it can be assumed so readily that husbands feel like this about the mothers of their children, that women go ahead having babies ad nauseam?

Let's talk about some common feelings that are assumed to lead to childbearing:

1. Girls want babies because it is natural to want them.
2. Girls have babies because they like children.
3. Girls have babies because they want to fulfill a marriage.

None of those statements is fully true in our highly complex, artificial,



industrial and urban society, little is natural (we all wear shoes, we dial telephones), and this holds true for feelings, interpersonal behaviour and emotions, as Desmond Morris has pointed out in *The Human Zoo*.

Besides, attitudes about sex and babies vary so much from country to country, and from one century to another, that it seems more likely these attitudes come from culture, not Nature. That our attitude toward motherhood here, in this century, has grown adulatory to an unprecedented degree — and that this attitude seems to be changing as more women forgo maternity — may in itself argue that the desire for motherhood cannot be all that innate.

If the desire to reproduce does not result from instinct, does it at least result from love? When a woman wants a baby, is it because she loves her husband or wants to fulfill her marriage?

Well, I know that's the idea we've always accepted: you love a man; you

want to create a being that embodies that love. But when an ideal love situation exists, is a baby necessary? Perhaps not. A couple truly in love may need no child to embody that love, they embody it themselves.

As a friend of mine explains: "My biggest objection to our having children is that there's no one in the world who will deny that the husband-wife relationship is changed when there are children. I happen to cherish my relationship with Tom more than anything else in the world; so why should we change it?"

Why indeed? If you are greatly in love with a man, you can just plain live your love together, every day and every night, and you do not feel the need to change or improve the situation (the euphemism is "fulfill") by having a baby. Chicago can, of course, represent a desire for growth in a positive sense. It can also be compensatory in nature, implying dissatisfaction with what exists. A baby, therefore, can't be assumed to symbolise a perfect love.

And there are many women who have babies who do not have the slightest love for children. The woman may instead love herself and want an extension of herself to love. Such a feeling may be healthy or it may be unhealthy. If a woman feels strongly that no other children could possibly do for her to love and care for — if the children must be hers and no one else's — then this desire is egocentric and may approach narcissism. It does not suggest love of children very strongly, that's for sure. If such a woman loved children, wouldn't she be out caring for children, not teaching?

I don't think many men have any enthusiasm at the prospect of offspring. As psychologist Helen Lopata has pointed out, men regard neither fatherhood nor husbandhood as their chief roles in life and are rather easily annoyed by the inconveniences of both.

Commonly, the way a husband explains the decision to have children is, "Well, it seemed about the time, guess." And many men make it clear that it was their wife who wanted the children, not them. ("Well, I thought it would make her happy, give her something to do, then it would be good" or "I didn't feel ready in fact was really reluctant, but she was so emotional about wanting a child...")

But does sex always suffer after children are born?

"Yes, I think it's inevitable that sex declines after children," said a divor-

"Well, I'll put it this way: I've never seen a case where it got better," said another.

"Your total romance picture declines, and so your sex life is going to go downhill, too, since men are conditioned to be stimulated sexually within a romantic context," went a third comment, in a later interview.

Dr Rustum Roy, of State College, Pennsylvania, feels that the main reason for this decline is the simple matter of increased demands on a wife's time and attention. The wife knows she's got to get up in four hours to feed the baby, she's miserably tired from working around the house all day in an unaccustomed schedule; she's out of sorts; she has a headache and just has to have some sleep. Not the sort of wife to pop into a black chiffon negligee and lure her man into rapturous abandon.

Let me quote a typical case. The girl was young, 23 perhaps, and with bright red hair streaked under an Indian band. She and her husband seemed far too young to be on the verge of separation, to have come to this Baltimore counselor's office as a last try to avoid divorce. . . .

She was looking at her husband angrily. "Why did you change so completely towards me after the children came?" she demanded.

"Elizabeth, please think back. Wasn't it you who changed? Even after Jimmy was old enough to leave him with a sitter, you had no time to meet me, no interest in planning anything together. . . ."

And the interview did show that the changes of attitude had been hers, at least initially.

Just the physical burdens of child care can cause a depressing change in a young wife. It occurs to me, really, that the problem of the population explosion might be solved — at once — if every girl who was even remotely thinking about babies were given a free batch of How-to-Be-a-Mother books, outlining the work involved.

None of the books suggests keeping up with her husband's world, or meeting him for lunch or drinks. So involved are these manuals with structuring and analysing all the tasks involved in child care that the husband is all but forgotten.

"You always seemed angry and pressured," the man was saying to his wife. "You did two things constantly: one, you complained about the housework; two, you never did it."

"There was never time to do a goddam thing. You know what a difficult baby Jimmy was: it wasn't my

fault that he would never sleep, that I was so busy taking him for check-ups and trying to stop his crying that I never — well, I barely had time to shop for groceries. . . ."

Another book-for-mothers, this one by Dr Clair Isbister and called *What Is Your Problem, Mother?* (I think I could answer that) tells of a British survey which studied about 700 full-time house-mothers. It seems that the average at-home mum spent 15 hours a day at child care and housekeeping.

I didn't believe it, either. But Elizabeth insisted almost tearfully that every minute was taken up. . . . And we visited some friends who have children last night and I noticed a few things I hadn't before. Fifteen hours might be about right. You see, even when a mother is just sitting down with her husband and friends to talk, she's apt to hear "Mummy!" and she has to



jump up and deal with a small child-crisis. It takes maybe 10 minutes. Or the telephone rings. And she must explain to another mother: "No, that's not really what went on at the playground. Yes, Keith was there alone, but it wasn't Keith who was causing the trouble. It was Jonathan, and . . . oh, Stephen came home crying? Oh, I'm sorry. . . . But it was really nothing serious; it was just. . . ." And that can take 20 minutes.

Those snatches of time do add up. They also subtract — from time spent with a husband.

"We never had a conversation after the babies came, Elizabeth, I swear it I would come home, honestly, with things I felt I wanted to talk over, tell you about. But by the time you finished feeding Jimmy and Mary, I'd had two martinis and was out of the mood. By the time they were in bed, there had been so much noise and confusion around the house that I just felt I wanted to be left alone. By that time, I wasn't even sure I wanted to talk to

you. Earlier in the evening, yes, but with all the interruptions. . . . It was like living with a servant who's on call 24 hours a day."

Or 15. I still don't quite believe 15 hours but, as Dr Isbister goes on to explain, it is a lot of work: "Think of the woman who has two children under two," Dr Isbister writes, "and often even three- and four-year-olds need lifting. Think how many miles that woman runs, looking to see that those children are not in trouble. Think of the constant mental strain of being on the alert — always listening, always ready to run, always half expecting an emergency. . . . Think of the time needed to dress, wash, supervise homework, take children to school or lessons, take baby for a walk. . . ."

That's all in addition to cooking, cleaning, laundry and errands. Dr Isbister adds, although: "Now, it really isn't quite as bad as it sounds because, except for the mothers at young children, we are not all working under pressure. We can pause now and again."

Except for the mothers of young children? Except for the mothers of young children? Now, just how does one get to be the mother of older children without first going through the mother of young children phase?

What happens to the girl-mother in the meantime? To her interest in life? To her sense of sheer fun? Will it survive daily exposure to all that child-created tension? Sometimes not; some mothers of young (or older) children don't laugh very easily or very spontaneously. If you or I as outsiders don't notice this, there's one person who does: her husband. To the question, "How has your wife changed since you had children?" there was one answer I got all the time: "She used to be more relaxed; she used to be a lot more fun. . . ." That was Elizabeth's husband's feeling.

Of course the problem is lessened if you use nursery schools. But that "constant mental strain of being on the alert" occurs just as easily in the evenings.

And finally, according to Dr Isbister, the mothers of older children may pause "now and again." Now and again? Now and again a mother may pause to think her own thoughts, read her own magazine, experience her own sensations, live a part of her own life? Now and again?

Yet escaping the baby trap, physically, is as easy as taking the Pill. But there are more subtle factors operating psychologically, factors that can weaken your will about the Pill.

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are that can undermine your confidence in the righteousness of your decision not to have children. There are pressures that can make you feel isolated, different, even guilty, because you're childless. Pressures that can tempt you to think, "Oh, it would be so much easier just to go ahead and get pregnant, just like everybody else. Then maybe people would stop pestering me." Pressures that can accumulate and be responsible for that forgotten Pill, that subconscious mistake.

In casual conversations, most people let you know that it's just assumed that your childlessness is temporary. They assume you'll get yourself in a "delicate condition" eventually. And they're not always delicate when it comes to asking about it.

"When are you going to start your family?" asks Aunt Helen (and just about everybody else in the world).

I was always annoyed by the question. Always. Even before Bill and I had dismissed the possibility of children, it seemed to me that people, asking about such a profound influence on the rest of your life, should allow you a decision beyond mere timing. The question (and please take note, all Aunt Helens) should not be, "When are you going to start your family?" but "Are you planning to have a family?" There should be a choice, an option.

Even though you, too, have a perfect right to be annoyed by the question, you cannot always dismiss the questioner with a flip one-liner. But once in a while you can.

For example, you run into a former schoolfriend you never could stand, at a store in town. She hushes her four-year-old with a sharp slap on the hand. Complaints that her five-year-old has ("without permission, you bad boy, Johnny") asked some little friends over for the afternoon as she has to run home quickly to fix peanut-butter sandwiches, adjusts her one-year-old in the stroller, saying "Thank goodness this one isn't quite old enough to socialize yet," then breaks off, looks at you hard, and whispers "And what about you and Bill? Don't you have any children yet?"

OK. Indulge yourself, "Of course not." you can say, "we're too smart for that." Or, "Never! We're having too much fun." And dash off to meet your husband for lunch.

I have my own ideas about keeping my husband happy, but once every few minutes I pick up some new ideas and I suggest that you do, too. I suggest, for example that we take

advantage of articles such as "Thirty-two Different Ways to Kiss — because we can. Not every girl who has children can. We talked about image change after childbirth, a change from free romantic girl to mother and a change that, if it occurs, makes using sex-related ideas difficult, incongruous, perhaps ridiculous. (A girl I know, a mother of three, tried one of the kisses suggested. Her husband responded with, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Lois?")

It's far more feminine to be winking winky while in your house or flat all day. This reason is obvious. For femininity to be functional there has to be a man around. Your husband isn't home during the day. (Hence the term "housewife.") If you stay home all day, you're married to a house. I'm unable to see much fun in that.

But if you're out in the world, meeting people, talking to them, having coffee with them, arguing with them, playing politics to get a certain



office project assigned to you, going to lunch with friends, picking up a new idea from a co-worker, interacting with people (some of whom are men), you are keeping your skills as a person and as a female very much alive.

To know and understand all this, you must communicate. And yet, most married couples don't. Not on any real level, anyway.

I know it seems, for a long time, as though everything falls into place naturally. When you first meet a guy and fall in love with him, it seems that you're holding nothing back, that your intimacy is complete, that communicating is natural. But that is really an illusion, based on novelty, the surface romanticism of dinners out and other fun rituals and sexual attraction.

Such superficial romanticism, obviously, cannot last. Sustaining an illusion is pretty impossible when you live with somebody. A while after marriage, the illusions begin to subside, pushed out by such subtle realities as juice left in the sink, towels crumpled on the bathroom floor (or a wife who's constantly running

around tossing out the juice tins and picking up all the towels, that is infinitely worse).

And there is a point — in most marriages, after a year or so — when the illusions are gone. And this occurs whether or not there are children. The difference is that the vanished illusions can be replaced by a deeper, real and personal intimacy if there are no children. (With children, on the other hand, the leisure that is so vital to real self-discovery is hard to find.) For childless couples, the loss of illusion we've been talking about does not mean the loss of romance, and it does not mean, for us, any loss of sexuality. The surface romanticism goes, what comes next is real.

But, with the wife-in-the-home, taking care of babies, and the husband-outside-the-home, involved in studies, ideal communication just couldn't result.

Most married couples get to know each other — up to a point, a certain, clearly-defined point — and that's it. That stopping point is the point beyond which any vulnerability or inadequacy might be exposed. And many people feel inadequate within their field of work. Probably the majority of men are, on their own terms, unsuccessful in their jobs. Some degree of dissatisfaction is the general rule. That's why many wives when they ask, "How was work today dear?" get some form of silence.

This happens all the time to men in households with children. I heard dozens of comments more or less like the following: "Look, supposing I did want to talk something over, in the first place, she wouldn't understand anyway. If I tell her I lost an account, she would think I was saying I was being fired, and we would argue all night. But besides, who can talk about the office or anything with Louise, yelling about who hit Tommy and where Jimmy left his bike and why were they late getting home? Believe me, even if I come home at six with something on my mind, who can remember it after that commotion?"

So with all that evidence against the baby trap, stay free. At least consider the option of a childless lifestyle. For the first time in history, the option is easily yours to take. And the rewards are almost limitless: marital enrichment, personal independence and the chance to live a creative, full and true life as those I value most.

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